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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2344 (2017), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my previous report on 15 June 2017 (A/71/932-S/2017/508). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events relating to Afghanistan. In the interim, a special report on the strategic review of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was issued on 10 August 2017 (A/72/312-S/2017/696).

II. Relevant developments

3. The National Unity Government faced increasingly vocal opposition from a variety of political figures, who became more active in mobilizing supporters following the announcement of an electoral date for 2018. The formation of the "Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan", which unites leading figures from three major political parties, created an opposition bloc with a support base predominately in the north of Afghanistan as well as affiliations in other parts of the country. The Independent Election Commission announced 7 July 2018 as the date for parliamentary and district council elections and made progress on electoral preparations, including steps towards improving the credibility of the electoral process, despite persistent public scepticism. The security situation remained highly volatile, as the Government and the Taliban exchanged control of several district centres during the reporting period, with casualties on both sides. A number of high-profile security incidents, including a suicide attack on a Shia mosque in the city of

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Herat on 1 August, mass killings in Sari Pul Province from 3 to 5 August and a suicide attack on a Shia mosque in Kabul on 25 August, drew widespread condemnation while prompting fears of rising sectarian tension and further intensifying public criticism of the Government for not being able to provide security. Civilians continued to suffer disproportionately from the conflict, with continuing high levels of civilian casualties and displacement. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan showed signs of improved cooperation in some areas. Afghanistan continued its regional engagement both bilaterally and through multilateral forums, in particular with the five Central Asian States. There was no tangible progress towards a peace process between the Government and the Taliban.

A. Political developments

4. My previous periodic report was issued in the middle of a month of political crisis, precipitated by the massive truck-borne suicide attack on 31 May, which was carried out in the heart of the city of Kabul. The attack resulted in demonstrations against the Government, which was accused by protestors of failing to protect its citizens. This perception was further exacerbated when several demonstrators were killed during the protests, allegedly by security officials. A subsequent attack at the funeral of one of the deceased protestors could have led to the killing of a number of key members of the Jamiat-e Islami political party, including the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani. This led prominent Jamiat-affiliated politicians to publicly accuse the Government of a conspiracy and prolonged public demonstrations and street blockades in Kabul. Mr. Abdullah declined to resign, despite calls to do so from some prominent Jamiat-e Islami members. On 20 June, the Government forcibly removed the last street blockades in Kabul, during which one protestor was killed and five others injured by Afghan security forces, leading to fears of escalating violence. This did not materialize, and the Eid holidays marking the end of Ramadan gave way to a period of relative calm. However, the events of the month had caused a significant shift in the political climate, with a marked rift in the relationship between the President, Ashraf Ghani, and key members of the Jamiat-e Islami party.

5. In this political and security context, a new political dynamic emerged, characterized by a consolidation of authority within the National Unity Government around the President. Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah reached consensus on high-level appointments, which had previously represented a source of contention between the two leaders. During the reporting period, the President nominated several new ministers, including a new Minister of the Interior and a new head of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, and replaced all nine commissioners of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission. However, the parliamentary approval process for ministers remained challenging, as the legislature continued to assert its prerogatives against the executive branch; a number of ministers are currently serving in an acting capacity.

6. Relations between the President and Jamiat-e Islami were further exacerbated following a tense stand-off in Mazar-e Sharif on 14 August between a member of the Provincial Council, Asif Momand, and forces loyal to the Governor of Balkh Province, Atta Noor, who is also the Chief Executive of the Jamiat party. The incident culminated in a shoot-out between the Governor's forces and armed Hizb-i Islami affiliates, who supported Mr. Momand. Subsequently, Mr. Momand was transferred to the custody of the National Directorate of Security, where he remained until his release on 17 August.

7. Relations also remained tense between the President and the Junbish-e Milli party, whose leader, the First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, remains under indictment for the alleged arbitrary detention and sexual assault of a political rival in November 2016. Despite persistent rumours of his imminent return and an aborted attempt to do so on 17 July, Mr. Dostum remained in Ankara, where he has officially been undergoing medical treatment since 19 May. On 9 July, pretrial proceedings began in the case against the First Vice-President and nine co-defendants, none of whom appeared before the court.

8. On 22 June, the Independent Election Commission announced 7 July 2018 as the date for parliamentary and district council elections. The announcement had a galvanizing effect on political actors and provided a new outlet for political activity, including among groups that had previously called for non-constitutional measures to replace the National Unity Government. In the following weeks, a number of opposition figures and groups began to build coalitions aimed at contesting the elections. These emerging opposition coalitions coalesced around criticism of the Government and the deteriorating security and economic situation, as well as perceptions of a growing concentration of power within the Presidential Palace.

9. The largest new group announced itself in Ankara on 29 June, as Mr. Dostum, Mr. Noor and the Second Deputy Chief Executive, Mohammad Mohaqiq, declared an alliance, the "Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan", which unites figures from the Jamiat-e Islami, Hezb-i Wahdat Islami Mardum-e Afghanistan and Junbish-e Milli parties and draws from sizeable constituencies within the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities. The cooperation between Jamiat and Junbish was a particularly notable development, given the parties' long and occasionally violent rivalry. To date, the alliance has mobilized its northern support base while attempting to forge links with other opposition figures. Mr. Noor led a coalition rally in Mazar-e Sharif on 1 August, which was attended by some 3,000 people; Jamiat figures such as Mr. Abdullah and Mr. Rabbani were absent. Another rally was held in Jalalabad on the same day to inaugurate the "Council of the East", consisting of parliamentarians from the eastern provinces, who subsequently travelled to Mazar-e Sharif for discussions with Mr. Noor. Yet another group of opposition figures announced the formation of Mehwar-e Mardom-e Afghanistan ("Axis of the People of Afghanistan"), which features a number of Cabinet officials from the former Karzai administration.

10. Other groupings also appeared energized by the announcement of an election date. The Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council, which includes the former Minister of the Interior, Umar Daudzai, and the former mujahidin leader, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, made public statements and began to seek out allies. Similarly, the leader of the New National Front, Anwar ul-Haq Ahady, held several meetings with other opposition figures, including with Mr. Dostum and representatives of the Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council. The Hizb-i Islami political grouping also took steps towards election preparations. At a press conference on 6 July, its founder, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, announced the unification of the registered party Hizb-i Islami Afghanistan with his own Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin faction. He also stated that the new party would continue to support the political system. However, the two wings of the party continued to retain separate party structures in many provinces.

11. Street demonstrations decreased in size and intensity during the reporting period. Following the removal of its protest tents from the streets of Kabul in late June, the Tajik-dominated Uprising for Change movement redirected its focus on initiating cooperation with parts of the political establishment. On 23 July, the President met with activists of the Hazara-dominated Enlightenment Movement and

promised a joint commission to explore development opportunities in the Hazara-majority Central Highlands.

12. Following the announcement of an election date, technical and operational preparations commenced. On 7 August, the Independent Election Commission launched an assessment to ensure that polling stations were optimally located in public buildings to serve all communities. With the assistance of the United Nations, on 14 August, the Commission submitted specifications for biometric voter registration technology to the National Procurement Authority, and on 17 August, the Authority initiated a limited tendering process for the technology. The reregistration of eligible Afghan voters with biometric technology would allow the Commission, for the first time, to compile polling station-specific voter lists.

13. Key political decisions for the elections remain pending. According to the Independent Election Commission road map, presented on 5 July, they included decisions on electoral constituencies, the use of technology for voter verification, polling and results management and funding modalities for the electoral process. Meanwhile, many parties and civil society organizations have expressed scepticism about the will and the capacity of the Government to organize credible elections, citing both security concerns and doubts about the independence of the Independent Election Commission.

14. No discernible progress has been made in fostering negotiations between the Government and the Taliban. The High Peace Council, under its new Chair, Karim Khalili, continued to revise its strategy and workplans within the overall framework of the President's vision for peace as outlined to international donors in April. UNAMA has continued its formal dialogue with the Taliban in an effort to seek a political solution to the continuing conflict. The Joint Executive Commission, responsible for the implementation of the peace agreement between the Government and Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin, has been folded into the High Peace Council. As part of its efforts to support local-level peacebuilding, UNAMA facilitated three local peace initiatives covering six different provinces during the reporting period, including a dialogue between elders from two districts of Kandahar Province and a series of consultations with independent religious figures in Khost Province.

B. Security

15. The conflict continued unabated throughout the country. The United Nations recorded 5,532 security-related incidents from 15 June to 31 August 2017, representing an increase of 3 per cent compared with the same period in 2016. By the end of August 2017, the United Nations had recorded more than 16,290 security-related incidents for the first eight months of the year. The continuing high numbers are attributed mainly to armed clashes, which represent 64 per cent of the total security incidents and have increased by 5 per cent since 2016. The record level of armed clashes seen during 2017 reinforced the shift in the conflict evident since earlier in the year, away from asymmetric attacks towards a more traditional conflict pattern characterized by often prolonged armed clashes between government and anti-government forces. Asymmetric attacks, such as detonations of improvised explosive devices, suicide attacks, assassinations and abductions, decreased by 3 per cent compared with the same period in 2016 but remained the main cause of civilian casualties. The eastern region experienced the highest number of incidents, followed by the southern region.

16. The conflict has further evolved because of the Government's strategic decision, as a result of Taliban gains in rural areas, to focus its resources on defending population centres and disrupting the consolidation of Taliban control

over strategic areas. This change has led to an increasing number of clashes for control over lines of communication and vital infrastructure. In addition, the more secure hold of the Taliban over some rural areas has allowed them to undertake more frequent attacks in the north of Afghanistan.

17. The Taliban maintained their ability to contest territory across the country, compelling the Government to devote significant resources to maintain the status quo. In contrast with 2016, the Taliban have not launched any major attempts to capture a provincial capital since the announcement of their Operation Mansouri offensive in April. However, the Taliban were able to overrun and temporarily hold several district centres, including Taywara in the western province of Ghor, Kohistan and Ghormach in the northern province of Faryab and Jani Khel in the eastern province of Paktiya. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces recaptured Taywara and Kohistan within a week, while control of Jani Khel changed three times during the reporting period. In the north-east, the Taliban put intense pressure on Qaramol, Dawlat Abad, Shirin Tagab and Khwajah Sabz Posh districts along the Maimana-Andkhoy highway in Faryab Province. In the south, the Taliban intensified their attacks on districts adjacent to the provincial capitals of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, as well as on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. On 17 July, Afghan forces recaptured Nawah-ye Barakzai district in Helmand Province, which had been under Taliban control since October 2016.

18. The Government continued to implement its four-year plan on security sector reform, with the goals of increasing the capability of government forces, fighting corruption, improving security leadership and aligning operations with overall policy objectives, which was approved by presidential decree in May 2017. As part of the plan, the authority over the Afghan Border Police has been authorized for transfer from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Defence. On 20 August, the Special Forces of the Afghan National Army were elevated from division to corps level, which has as a target to double its personnel to 30,000 by the end of 2017. Nevertheless, the Government continued to face increasing challenges owing to the high levels of attrition in the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police as a result of casualties and desertion as well as difficulties in securing new recruits, in particular at the officer entry level.

19. While Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) operations remain mostly limited to eastern Afghanistan, the group claimed responsibility for eight significant attacks nationwide during the reporting period. The group consolidated its presence in Kunar Province and succeeded in re-establishing operational capacity in areas of Nangarhar Province that previously had been cleared by Afghan security forces. Elsewhere, alleged ISIL-KP activities were reported in the northern provinces of Jowzjan and Sari Pul, as well as in the western provinces of Herat and Ghor, indicating that the group may have attracted affiliates in areas beyond its stronghold in the east.

20. Several high-profile security incidents during the reporting period led to a further deterioration of public confidence in the Government's security arrangements. The attack on a Shia mosque in Herat on 1 August killed over 90 people and drew widespread condemnation from both the Afghan public and the international community. The Taliban and self-proclaimed ISIL-KP affiliates launched an attack on the Mirza Olang area of Sayyad district in Sari Pul Province, leading to clashes from 3 to 5 August with local pro-government militia and allegations of mass killings of civilians. A subsequent investigation by UNAMA, including a fact-finding mission to the affected district, indicated that at least 36 people had been killed in the attack, many of them civilians or personnel hors de combat. As in Herat, the majority of the documented casualties were Shia. Another

attack on a Shia mosque occurred in Kabul on 25 August, killing 28 civilians, with ISIL-KP claiming responsibility.

21. At a summit of defence ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), held in Brussels on 29 June, NATO allies and partners reaffirmed their commitment to Afghanistan until the end of 2020 and several allies announced increased troop contributions to the NATO Resolute Support Mission. However, troop deployment numbers remain significantly below the authorized levels. On 21 August, following the conclusion of a policy review by the United States of America on South Asia, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, announced a new strategy for Afghanistan and that United States troops would remain in Afghanistan in line with conditions on the ground.

22. Following the suicide attack near the diplomatic "Green Zone" in Kabul on 31 May, the Government upgraded security arrangements in the centre of the city. Several diplomatic missions had scaled down their staffing levels in the capital after the attack, leading to a significant overall decrease in the international footprint. UNAMA remained staffed at full capacity. During the reporting period, there were five incidents involving United Nations personnel, including three incidents of intimidation, one criminal case and one incident of abduction. On 13 August, two United Nations staff members who had been abducted on 8 June in Paktiya Province were released.

C. Regional cooperation

23. The bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan showed some signs of improved cooperation, as both countries took steps to improve relations. During a visit by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi, on 24 and 25 June, Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to establish a crisis control mechanism for emergency communications, and, as a result, the three countries created a ministerial-level trilateral dialogue mechanism. On 2 July, Pakistan appointed a new Ambassador to Afghanistan, a post that had been vacant for several months. Following a visit by a senatorial delegation from the United States to Islamabad and Kabul from 2 to 4 July, Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to conduct coordinated security operations against terrorist groups along the border, with monitoring and verification by the United States. On 15 August, the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Tehmina Janjua, visited Kabul on one of her first foreign trips, meeting with the President of Afghanistan to discuss ways of building mutual trust.

24. The Government continued its multilateral engagement through mechanisms such as the Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process. An expert meeting of the Process, on trade, commerce and investment opportunities, was held in Delhi from 6 to 8 August, with participants reaffirming their commitment to enhancing economic and connectivity cooperation. The Government focused increasingly on its relationship with the five Central Asian States, as the President made a number of visits to the region. The President visited Turkmenistan on 3 July, where he signed several bilateral transport agreements, and on 6 July he visited Dushanbe for a trilateral dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan.

25. Negotiations restarted on a bilateral comprehensive strategic cooperation agreement between Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is aimed at improving cooperation in the areas of security, the economy, refugees, culture and education. On 17 and 18 June, the first meeting of five technical committees was convened in Tehran. However, water remained an issue of contention between the two countries. On 3 July, at the International Conference on Combating Sand and Dust Storms, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, criticized the

construction of dams in Afghanistan. The remarks generated a public backlash in Afghanistan, with street demonstrations in the cities of Herat, Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad. The remarks were interpreted as undermining the right of Afghanistan to manage its own water resources. On 24 July, the National Security Adviser, Hanif Atmar, visited Tehran for consultations with his counterpart on counter-terrorism issues. On 5 August, President Ghani attended President Rouhani's inauguration ceremony in Tehran.

III. Human rights

26. On 17 July, UNAMA released its midyear report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Between 1 January and 30 June, the Mission documented 5,243 civilian casualties (1,662 deaths and 3,581 injured), on a par with civilian casualty figures documented in the same period in 2016. Conflict-related violence also destroyed livelihoods, homes and property, displaced thousands of families and restricted access to education, health and other services. UNAMA attributed 67 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements (43 per cent to the Taliban, 19 per cent to unidentified anti-government elements and 5 per cent to ISIL-KP), 18 per cent to pro-government forces (15 per cent to Afghan national security forces, 2 per cent to international military forces and 1 per cent to pro-government armed groups), 10 per cent to unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces, 4 per cent to unattributed explosive remnants of war and 1 per cent to cross-border shelling.

27. The indiscriminate and unlawful use of combined improvised explosive device tactics by anti-government elements in civilian-populated areas, particularly suicide bombs and pressure-plate devices, accounted for 2,079 civilian casualties (596 deaths and 1,483 injured), or 40 per cent of all civilian casualties. Ground engagements between pro-government forces and anti-government elements were the second leading cause of civilian casualties (434 deaths and 1,375 injured). Women casualties increased by 23 per cent compared with the same period in 2016. The Mission documented 1,557 child casualties (436 deaths and 1,141 injured), accounting for 30 per cent of the total civilian casualties.

28. During the first six months of 2017, UNAMA documented 32 conflict-related incidents targeting or affecting access to health services or health-care workers, which resulted in 58 civilian casualties (27 deaths and 31 injured) and 18 civilian abductions. Most of the casualties occurred during the complex attack on the Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan Hospital in Kabul on 8 March. UNAMA documented a rise in attacks and incidents impacting education facilities and education-related personnel, with 24 incidents verified compared with 14 in the first quarter of 2017. Six incidents directly targeted girls' schools. During the second quarter of 2017, UNAMA documented seven incidents of denial of humanitarian access; all were attributed to armed opposition groups: six to the Taliban and one to ISIL-KP.

29. UNAMA verified the recruitment and use of 21 boys, including 15 by anti-government elements (11 by ISIL-KP, 3 by the Taliban, 6 by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and 1 by an unidentified armed group). The Mission received reports of up to 50 boys (10 verified to date) recruited by ISIL-KP who were undergoing religious and military training in Ghor Province. UNAMA continued sensitizing and training Afghan national security forces on the protection of children in armed conflict. On 27 August, UNAMA and the United Nations Children's Fund jointly conducted a one-day training session on child rights for 17 district chiefs of police in the city of Kabul.

30. Justice and redress for women remained low amid the continued prevalence of violence against women. The implementation of the national action plan on women, peace and security remained slow despite efforts that were focused on law reform and advocacy around violence against women and harassment and the strengthening of the prosecutor's office to address cases of violence against women. Of the revised estimated $83.0 million required for the implementation of the national action plan, $31.2 million is available, while the remaining amount has yet to be secured from donors. The prosecution units for the elimination of violence against women are now present in all 34 provinces, with 27 units staffed with at least one female prosecutor. The Ministry of the Interior continued efforts to enhance women's participation in the security sector, in particular their recruitment and promotion to leadership roles. With regard to women's participation in peace and reconciliation processes, six more women were introduced as members of the High Peace Council, bringing the total number to 13 out of 52 members.

31. On 16 August, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission launched a national inquiry on the protection of the rights of victims of armed conflict and terrorism. UNAMA will provide technical support for the normative framework and the collection of data on civilian casualties. On 22 August, the Minister of Justice chaired an interministerial working group tasked with reviewing the recommendations made by the Committee against Torture in its concluding observations on the second periodic report of Afghanistan and preparing a follow-up report and plan of action for submission to the Committee in May 2018. Civil society actors continued to face intimidation and threats by anti-government elements and also experienced a lack of cooperation by local authorities in relation to those threats. UNAMA recorded one incident of intimidation of a human rights defender in Badghis Province and one incident of intimidation against a civil society actor in Herat Province. UNAMA also recorded one incident involving threats against a local journalist by anti-government elements in Farah Province. In July, civil society actors expressed concerns about the new draft law on gatherings, strikes and protests that sets conditions for the duration and organization of protests in certain areas and also maps out the authority of security forces in dealing with protests.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and coordination of development assistance

32. On 9 July, the National Unity Government convened the twentieth meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board in Kabul, co-chaired by my Special Representative and the Minister of Finance, Eklil Hakimi, with a focus on reform and development commitments ahead of a meeting of senior officials set for later in 2017. In the area of democratic, transparent and accountable government, ministerial speakers discussed election preparations, civil service reforms, subnational governance, judicial reforms, security, civil society engagement and anti-corruption. During a session on service delivery, speakers addressed the importance of institutional reforms and discussed the Government's commitments to delivering basic services to returnees and internally displaced populations. With regard to private sector growth and infrastructure, panellists identified measures to enhance the business environment and the Government committed to prioritizing private sector needs in the coming months.

33. In an effort to improve inclusivity, the Government took steps to engage civil society in development and reform processes. Under the Open Government Partnership, civil society representatives began work on a national action plan to promote good governance, anti-corruption and transparency. UNAMA facilitated the

participation of civil society at the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board meeting, where participants emphasized a greater role for civil society in monitoring mutual commitments by the Government and the international community. The national strategy on access to information, launched on 13 August, also called for civil society and the media to play a role in promoting public awareness of the right of citizens to access information and monitoring the implementation of the law on access to information.

34. Economic growth remained slow in the face of ongoing security and governance challenges. At a briefing on 11 July, the International Monetary Fund reported slight downward adjustments of economic growth estimates for 2017 and 2018, to 2.5 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. However, the Fund does not expect the revisions to affect the Government's attainment of other quantitative targets, for which progress was reported to be on track. Despite persistently low growth, domestic revenue collection reportedly exceeded targets, although receipt of some operating grants from donors slowed. Key priorities in the Government's programme with the Fund will require parliamentary action in the coming months.

35. The Government continued to prioritize its anti-corruption efforts, in particular at the policy level. Between 22 June and 16 August, the National High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption convened four times, after remaining dormant for the first half of 2017. Chaired by the President, the Council adopted institutional reform plans for the Supreme Court, the Office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Justice and the Afghan Independent Bar Association. In late August, the Government circulated its draft anti-corruption strategy, a commitment from the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, held in October 2016, which was due to be adopted by June 2017. From 6 to 8 August, during a three-day joint conference on combating corruption in the defence and security sectors in Afghanistan, the Attorney General signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Defence, the National Directorate of Security and the Ministry of the Interior, aimed at developing joint mechanisms to combat corruption among the security institutions.

36. The Anti-Corruption Justice Centre has completed 21 cases at the trial and appellate levels against 86 accused. Outcomes include the conviction and sentencing to 20 years' imprisonment of a General for fuel fraud and stealing equipment. The security of Centre personnel remains an ongoing concern, and the presidential decree of 6 June, which obligated the Ministries of the Interior and Urban Development, the Office of the Attorney General and the National Directorate of Security to contribute to the protection of Centre personnel against security threats, has yet to be implemented.

37. With regard to local government accountability, on 30 July, the Government issued the Provincial Council Oversight Regulations, which lay out an enhanced role for the provincial councils in monitoring line departments and other government entities. The President agreed to improve coordination with the provincial councils by conducting regular regional meetings and inviting a representative of the councils to attend Cabinet meetings.

V. Humanitarian assistance

38. Civilians continued to bear the brunt of the ongoing conflict. Between mid-June and 15 August, more than 32,300 people were forced to flee their homes as a result of fighting, bringing the total number of displaced persons to more than 202,000 in 2017. Internal displacement has affected 30 of the 34 provinces, with Baghlan and Kunduz in the north, Nangarhar in the east and Uruzgan and Kandahar in the south experiencing the highest levels of displacement. While there was an

overall reduction in the number of people displaced compared with the same period in 2016, the deteriorating security situation has left many displaced communities in an increasingly precarious situation, with no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin. As at 31 August, the total funding for humanitarian action in Afghanistan stood at $235 million, of which $181 million was for activities included in the Humanitarian Response Plan.

39. Under the voluntary repatriation programme of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 14,000 registered Afghan refugees who returned to Afghanistan during the reporting period were assisted. Over 98 per cent of them were returning from Pakistan. Returning individuals received an average of $200 per person to pay for transport and immediate humanitarian needs.

40. The deportation and spontaneous return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan continued, with 15,567 arrivals (14,653 spontaneous arrivals and 914 deportees) between 15 June and 31 August, accounting for 19 per cent of the total arrivals from Pakistan in 2017. Since 1 January, the total number of undocumented returnees arriving from Pakistan rose to 83,505, down from 131,033 over the same period in 2016. During the reporting period, 86,906 arrivals from the Islamic Republic of Iran (29,044 spontaneous arrivals and 57,862 deportees) were documented. Of the total returnee population, the International Organization for Migration assisted 18,818 returnees (93 per cent) from Pakistan and 4,295 returnees (5 per cent) from the Islamic Republic of Iran during that period. Between 15 June and 31 August, the International Organization for Migration also assisted 479 returnees from Europe, compared with 995 for the same period in 2016. Separately, from mid-June to August, the World Food Programme provided assistance to 117,940 returnees and internally displaced persons who had been displaced as a result of conflict in various parts of the country, and joint Government-United Nations verification assessments are ongoing to identify additional internally displaced persons for assistance in the country.

41. From 15 June to 15 August, United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners provided 67,527 displaced people with assistance. Across the country, 2.2 million people of the planned 5.7 million received humanitarian assistance in all sectors from January to the end of June. However, constraints on humanitarian access continued to be recorded, with a total of 40 incidents affecting the United Nations and humanitarian partners registered during the reporting period and 214 since January. Three aid workers with Catholic Relief Services, a non-governmental organization, were killed and two injured in an attack on their vehicle in Ghor Province on 14 August. Since the start of 2017, 12 aid workers have been killed and as many injured. Health workers and health facilities continue to be heavily affected, with 26 incidents registered in the reporting period, bringing the total incidents so far in 2017 to 88. From June to August, dozens of health facilities were forced by armed groups to close down temporarily in Laghman Province, north of Kabul, and in the western provinces of Farah and Badghis in an attempt to coerce non-governmental organizations that are running the facilities to improve service delivery for their combatants. Overall in 2017, around half a million people are estimated to have at times been deprived of access to health care as a result of these tactics. Humanitarian partners continued to develop different modalities of delivering humanitarian assistance to communities in need, regardless of which party to the conflict is in control, and have increased sensitization efforts on humanitarian principles, notably neutrality and operational independence.

42. The polio eradication programme made significant progress, particularly in the northern province of Kunduz, where new importation from February 2017 was successfully contained. However, in the southern region, local transmission as a

result of frequent cross-border movement gave rise to five polio cases in Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul Provinces. Access for vaccinators in the southern region remains fragile, and in July, a ban on subnational immunization days vaccination campaigns in four districts of Kandahar resulted in 64,000 children remaining inaccessible, along with another 60,000 from the eastern, south-eastern and north-eastern regions.

43. The Mine Action Service of the United Nations continued with the transfer of responsibility for the management of the Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan to the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority. The Service will continue to support both institutions with capacity-building. The Mine Action Service and partners continued to provide risk education at encashment and transit centres to alert returnees to the danger posed by landmines, explosive remnants of war and abandoned pressure-plate improvised explosive devices. From 1 June to 31 July, 40,414 returnees received such education. In addition, mine action partners, coordinated by the Mine Action Service and the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination, declared 20 communities mine-free, which enabled approximately 20,000 individuals across 15.34 km^2 to move freely within their community. However, it is estimated that 3,378 minefields, 301 battlefields and 42 contaminated firing ranges remain, affecting 1,464 communities. The average monthly incident rate from January to June 2017 of 182 victims represents an increase compared with the monthly average of 164 victims recorded from January to June 2016; the vast majority (77 per cent) are due to explosive remnants of war and pressure-plate improvised explosive devices rather than landmines. As part of the Afghan Civilian Assistance Programme, the Mine Action Service assisted victims of large-scale improvised explosive attacks during the reporting period, including the vehicle-borne suicide attack of 31 May in Kabul, when some 550 families received immediate assistance packages.

VI. Counter-narcotics

44. From 1 June to 26 August, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 629 counter-narcotics operations, which resulted in the seizure of 569 kg of heroin, 9,644 kg of morphine, 4,841 kg of opium, 25.4 kg of methamphetamine, 2,867 kg of hashish, 7,868 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 20,338 litres of liquid precursor chemicals and 722 K-tablets (synthetic drugs). In addition, three heroin processing laboratories were dismantled and 103 vehicles, 34 weapons and 177 mobile telephones were seized. During the counter-narcotics operations, a total of 708 suspects were arrested and one officer from the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces was wounded.

45. Regional cooperation on counter-narcotics continued during the reporting period, with a meeting on precursor cases held on 30 August in Almaty, Kazakhstan, within the framework of the Regional Intelligence Working Group on Precursors. At the meeting, four cases were reviewed, and backtracking investigations were launched at the regional level. The Ministry of Public Health, with the support of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, continued to work towards the national adoption of the international standards for the treatment of drug use disorders of the Office and the World Health Organization. As part of the process, the Ministry launched a pilot of a quality assurance mechanism aimed at improving the treatment of drug use disorders.

VII. Mission support

46. The Mission's vacancy rate as at 31 July 2017 was 11 per cent, compared with the approved vacancy rate of 14 per cent for international staff, and 4 per cent compared with the combined approved average vacancy rate of 7.5 per cent for national staff. Despite special measures granted for the Mission to recruit and retain more national female staff, their representation remains very low, notwithstanding an overall increase of 3 per cent from the previous reporting period. As at 31 July 2017, the female representation for each category of staff stood at: 30 per cent (international); 36 per cent (United Nations Volunteers); 8 per cent (National Professional Officers); and 7 per cent (Local level). Between 15 June and 15 August, UNAMA conducted 155 road and 13 air missions, as well as 417 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

47. The Mission began planning a reconfiguration of its structure and staffing to align its budget for 2018 with the recommendations made in my special report on the strategic review of UNAMA. Additionally, opportunities for co-location between UNAMA and United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes and improved cost recovery procedures continued to be explored. The Mission also continued to streamline support services, including medical and ground transportation services, as well as air assets.

VIII. Observations

48. I remain deeply concerned about the security situation in Afghanistan. Attacks in the western province of Herat, the northern province of Sari Pul, the southern province of Helmand and the capital, Kabul, which killed dozens of people and wounded many more, were a stark reminder of the heavy toll of the conflict on civilians in Afghanistan. Thousands of Afghans are still being displaced each month, losing their livelihoods and becoming separated from their communities as they flee from violence. While the people of Afghanistan continue to demonstrate immense courage and resilience in the face of adversity, their plight is a reminder, as always, that achieving lasting peace must be the primary goal towards which all efforts must be directed.

49. In this regard, I am also concerned by the lack of tangible progress towards a peace process, which remains the most urgent imperative facing Afghanistan. As I have stated in the past, the conflict has no military solution: peace can only be achieved through direct negotiations between the Government and the Taliban, which must form part of an inclusive, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process. I call upon all parties to create an environment in which such dialogue is possible. Noting the critical importance of regional countries in order to move towards a peace process, the Government's continuing commitment to the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation and the interest shown by the partners of Afghanistan in continuing the initiative deserve support. For its part, following the mandated strategic review of UNAMA in 2017, the United Nations stands with renewed determination and with full respect for the sovereignty of Afghanistan to support the Afghan people in their quest for peace. Only through the committed engagement of all parties can an end to this long and costly conflict be achieved.

50. In a volatile security environment, the rise in sectarian attacks is particularly troubling. The terrorist attacks against Shia mosques in the city of Herat on 1 August and in Kabul on 25 August, which killed dozens of civilians as they prayed, were unconscionable acts of violence against a religious minority. Such attacks not only cause great human suffering, but risk escalating tensions between

religious communities. In the wake of such incidents, the expressions of solidarity from religious leaders in Afghanistan across sectarian lines are heartening and provide examples that other community members may follow. Now, more than ever, Afghanistan needs demonstrations of national solidarity in the face of common threats and cynical attempts to promote further divisions.

51. The announcement by the Independent Election Commission of a date for parliamentary and district council elections in July 2018 sets an important objective that can contribute to democratic consolidation in Afghanistan. While the timelines are ambitious, with concerted and sustained attention the election date remains achievable, and both the Commission and the Government have demonstrated a commitment to improving the credibility of the electoral process through the implementation of several key reforms. If implemented, the introduction of biometric voting cards and polling station-specific lists would constitute major improvements to the country's electoral system. Credible elections in 2018 will provide a channel for the peaceful expression of political opposition in an increasingly volatile political environment. I encourage the electoral institutions to broaden their outreach to all stakeholders to build public support for elections and the electoral reform process.

52. As elections become a more concrete reality, opposition groups have begun to intensify their political activity and, in many cases, have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of the Government. The emergence of new political alliances, along with the persistence of youth protest movements, are indications of the growing vibrancy of the still young democratic culture in Afghanistan. However, the inflammatory rhetoric of some political figures exacerbates social tensions and can undermine the fragile political consensus represented by the Constitution. If left unchecked, it may risk destabilizing the political system. I therefore stress the importance of responsible conduct by all stakeholders to ensure that political dissent continues to be expressed peacefully and within the framework of the country's constitutional and democratic processes.

53. Despite enormous challenges, the Government has made progress on its reform agenda, particularly in the realm of anti-corruption. A key component of this is the work of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, which, since its inception in late 2016, has become an important pillar in overall efforts to combat impunity. As demonstrated by recent convictions of high-level officials, the Centre is increasingly handling complex cases. I commend the Government for its continued prioritization of anti-corruption activities, which is a crucial element in its efforts to build credibility among the population. The Government has also continued its regular and constructive engagement with development partners, as demonstrated most recently at the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board meeting in July. For its part, the United Nations will redouble its donor coordination efforts, both to improve the coherence of its development activities and to ensure their alignment with the Government's own priorities and more effective delivery.

54. Record numbers of civilians continue to be killed and injured by indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks perpetrated by anti-government elements. Yet I also note with concern the significant increase in civilian casualties resulting from air strikes by pro-government forces. I remind all parties to the conflict of their responsibilities to protect civilians during military operations and stress the need for accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. In this regard, I encourage the Government to formally endorse the national policy on civilian casualty prevention and mitigation. I welcome the ratification by the Government of Afghanistan of the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed

to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects and all the protocols thereto, including Protocol V, concerning explosive remnants of war.

55. As the Government considers how to implement the recommendations made by the Committee against Torture in its concluding observations on the second periodic review of Afghanistan, I encourage the Government to follow through on its public commitments both to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and to withdraw its reservations to the Convention, and all national institutions to enact effective measures of implementation in compliance with the Constitution of Afghanistan and international legal obligations.

56. Faced with significant challenges, the women of Afghanistan continue in their steadfast determination to achieve full and equal participation in public life. In this endeavour, the Government has proven itself to be a sincere and committed partner. The increased representation of women in the High Peace Council and the concerted efforts by the Government and its partners to address violence against women and girls are positive developments. I urge the Government to take concrete measures to strengthen the prosecution office and provincial units for the elimination of violence against women and the implementation of the national action plan on women, peace and security, including by allocating adequate resources, to ensure the effective provision of justice and redress for survivors and the participation of women in peace and reconciliation processes.

57. The reverberations of the suicide bombing of 31 May in Kabul continue to be felt, both by Afghans and their international partners. Following the attack, which was conducted in the city centre near the diplomatic enclave, many diplomatic missions scaled back their presence, with development staff numbers particularly affected. In this environment, the role of the United Nations on the ground has become even more crucial. I am grateful to the Government for its efforts to improve the security of the diplomatic community, which are being calibrated to enable UNAMA and the agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system to continue to operate at full capacity.

58. The implementation of the recommendations from my special report on the strategic review of UNAMA is under way, with the Mission looking to reconfigure its current posture. With reference to the reservations expressed by the Government, I wish to provide my personal assurance that the fundamental principles of Afghan national sovereignty, national leadership and national ownership, defining the work of the Mission, are unchanged. I would like to thank the Mission and its staff for its support to the review and convey my appreciation to the Government for its cooperation during the review.

59. I thank all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication to fulfilling our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan under very challenging conditions.